

Someone worth talking to

A sermon offered by Ruth Hopkins
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
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Genesis 18:20-32

The LORD said to Abraham, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know."

So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it."

Luke 11:1-13

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say:
Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Anne Lamott, author of Travelin Mercies and Bird by Bird says there are only two kinds of prayer, help me help me help me, and thank you thank you, thank you.

That is certainly true for me. I don't take regular prayer time – I do meditate, but having a conversation with God regularly is not always a part of my routine. I tend to call on God especially when I am in a crisis, the help me help me help me, and when the crisis passes, I offer up my thank yous.

Even my husband, the Buddhist, reverts to the Almighty in stressful times. When the computer server at work went down the other day, and all the files seemed lost, he confessed to a “help me, God”, and when it rebooted he offered up his grateful “thank you.”

I tend to treat God as the catch all dumping ground for all that's wrong with the world, followed by a healthy dose of “why don't you do something about it?” I tend to vent my anger at the world to God, or offer my sarcastic “Thanks a lot” when things don't go my way.

I blame God for things. When bad things happen, I ask why God is doing this to me. Which is really crazy, since I don't really believe God works like that. But, bad times can bring even the most progressive Christian to their knees, blurting out things we would never say in calmer, happier times.

It is a comfort to know that we are not alone in this – the psalms are full of people asking God to destroy their enemies, questioning God's whereabouts in times of trouble, and asking the age old questions, are you there? do you care?

We are taught from the time we are young that we have a special relationship with God, and that prayer is talking to God. The problem comes with just what kind of relationship we are talking about. How in the world do we relate with a God we can barely understand?

Our readings today give us two very vivid descriptions of talking with God. First is Father Abraham. Probably only second to Moses in the Bible for have conversations with God. God has heard reports about Sodom and Gommorah. He decides to send some spies down and find out the truth, and possibly annihilate the entire population. Abraham stays behind and questions the almighty.

“Um, God, are you really going to kill all those good people because some are bad? Let’s say there are 50 good people, would you spare the cities then?”

It is an astounding passage. I have to give it to Abraham. A God that can destroy cities is not one that I would want to be calling on the carpet. Abraham approaches his God with such confidence! Bargaining with God, questioning God’s decision, and actually reminding God of just who God is.

Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?

Abraham wheedles God into mercy, assuming that certainly God must be mistaken, it is just not God’s nature to do such violence. God saying, ok, if 50 good people are found he will spare them, Abraham bargaining for 40, then 30, then 20, getting God down to 10. Oh, to be able to bargain with God like that!

I have tried, often. The “If you do this for me, God, then I promise I will change my life” kind of prayer. Or, “If you fix it so I can win the lottery, I swear I will tithe, I really will.”

The most memorable time I bargained with God was right before I went to seminary. I kept feeling an urge, more like God was stalking me, actually, and I was doing my best to rationalize it away. So when my hometown church’s anniversary service rolled around, as I sat in that church’s pew, I had my own little chat with God.

“Ok, God, if you really want me, if I am supposed to do something about it, you can let me know right here, today.” Aha! I thought, I got him now. I won’t get an answer because God doesn’t work like that.

The fact that I did go to seminary should clue you in to what happened that day. To make a rather long story short, I got my answer during the service in clear and ringing tones. The preacher spoke some simple words about encouraging people in ministry, and growing the call, that sometimes the call comes in different ways. I felt my sister’s elbow in my ribs, and the preacher’s words seemed to hang in the air – like in a cartoon bubble. I got my answer. For the room full of people, the preacher’s words were ordinary and forgettable. To me, it seemed like God was speaking right in my ear.

Sometimes God gets close, too close. But more often than not, it is the distance we feel. I pray, many of you pray, and it seems like we get nothing in return. Our hearts sometimes ache in frustration for this God we believe in, but often get no answers from.

We wonder why we do it – why pray? If God does not deal in our everyday lives, why do we ask for the every day help? If we don’t get the answers we want, does it mean God is not there? Round and round we go.

So when Jesus tells us that God is our parent, ready to provide, it sounds like empty words. But like so many things Jesus said, there is always more to it.

In our reading from Luke, Jesus encourages us to pray to God, to address the almighty like a father, or mother. Close, intimate God. Just like a father or mother tries to satisfy a needy child, so our God, Jesus says, will respond to us.

Even if that response is only after much harranging. Jesus’ story about the friend asking for bread in the middle of the night – and only after much noise and bother does the friend fulfill his request – this nagging, this is how we can talk to God.

Like Abraham, we can needle God for answers, and expect God to show up.

When Jesus tells us to seek, knock, ask, it is in this context. The electricity of God is always flowing – but we need to flip the switch. Go ahead, nag God, ask God directly and often. Approach God with the confidence of a child asking a trusted parent. Seek God, look for God, listen for God. God will show up somewhere, because God is alive in us from creation.

That's what it means when God is our parent. It means we have some God in our DNA – we have the God spark, the spirit, inside us, all of us. When we pray, we name our pain, we name our joy, we bring our lives to that burning, living God. We become a part of the bigger God space. We invite the God in us to talk to the God beyond us. When we do this, miracles happen.

Anne Lamott writes about prayer in her book Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith. She describes prayer as “following instructions.” We are told to pray, we are not told how it works. She writes:

Usually if you pray from the heart, you get an answer – the phone rings or the mail comes, and the light gets in through the cracks, so you can see the next right thing to do.

Someone or something hears. I don't know much about it's nature, only that when I cry out, it hears, and moves closer to me, and I don't feel so alone. I feel better.

I heard a beautiful story from a good friend of mine, and I have to apologize because I can't remember if she heard it or read it – but the story, a true story, changed the way I think about prayer.

A woman was in a very bad car accident. She remembered the car spinning out of control, and landing in a ditch near the highway. She remembered leaving her body, seeing it in the car, bleeding. She floated above the scene, noticing that the traffic had backed up due to her accident, and noticed that some of the cars seemed to be lit up. She wanted to find out why some were lit and some were not, and that thought floated her to one of the glowing cars. A person inside the car was praying for the victims of the accident, not knowing who or what, just praying, and emitting a beautiful light. The cars that glowed had people inside them, praying. Alight with prayer. She returned to her body with a jolt as the EMTs worked on her. She returned to life with a new understanding of the power of prayer.

What does it mean? If we give off a beautiful light when we pray, it must be doing something. The world needs more light.

So often we have our own notions about what is answered prayer, or what constitutes a response from God. If we believe in a God that controls the weather, micro manages our football teams, and strikes people with disease and misfortune, well, who wants to talk to that God?

Jesus offers us a vision of a God that is close to us, God as our parent, God as our most intimate relationship. Creating and loving us in God's image. We talk to God because God lives in us. We can be with this God in every longing, every happiness, even death will not part us from this loving God. Sounds like someone worth talking to.